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Cihat Aşkın

Genel Yayın Yönetmeni

Ş.Şehvar Beşiroğlu

Genel Teknik Yönetmen

Z. Gonca Girgin Tohumcu

Yayın Yönetmeni: Belma Kurtişoğlu

Teknik Yönetmen: F. Merve Eken Küçükaksoy

Teknik Yönetmen: Ahmed Tohumcu

Yayın Koordinatörü

Gözde Çolakoglu

Yayın Kurulu

Claire Levy

Irene Markoff

Martin Stokes

Helen Rees

Robert Reigle

Ş.Şehvar Beşiroğlu

Fırat Kutluk

Songül Karahasanoğlu

Adnan Koç

Belma Kurtişoğlu

Erol Parlak

Münir Nurettin Beken

Hakan Şensoy

Recep Uslu

Mehmet Öcal Özbilgin

Yazışma adresi:

İTÜ TMDK

İdari Bina, Maçka Kampüsü, 34657

Telefon: (0212) 248 90 87/119

Faks: (0212) 240 27 50

e-mail: zgoncat@itu.edu.tr

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Three Levels of Representation of the Occult in Music: A proposal for a model of Repertoire Catalogation

Johann F.W. Hasler

The magical, the occult and the esoteric have been a constant fountain of inspiration for composers and music theorists of all times. From the Florentine *Intermezzo* about the music of the spheres and the magical powers of music and Kepler's translation of his astronomical observations to 'cosmic music', to Stockhausen's Gnostic operas about angels and Messiaen's symphony on cosmic unity, passing through the Masonic works of Mozart, the theosophical ones of Scriabin and the astrological suite of Holst, composers of all styles, aesthetic affiliations and varying degrees of commitment to occult movements and systems have drawn inspiration from the mystical and occult for their works.

This paper argues that a careful study of the classical repertoire based on or inspired by occult themes will show that there are three main levels of representation of the occult in music, and that the decisions on the level of representation that a composer makes while working on a piece may modify the musical material, from a mere thematic or otherwise extra-musical connection in some of the subtler approaches, to a complete re-appraisal and re-design of the whole musical system and theory in the more radical ones. The paper also proposes that this is seems to be dependent on the level of familiarity of the composer with the chosen occult system or theme, and perhaps also with his ideological commitment to it.

Speculative music as musical occultism – expanding a definition

In his book *Music and the Occult, French Musical Philosophies 1750-1950*, Joscelyn Godwin defines speculative music as "the part of music theory that has nothing to do with practice, but is concerned with identifying the principles of music. It is the esoteric part of music theory, and as such readily absorbs ideas from theosophy, Hermeticism, and the occult sciences" (Godwin 1995: 4).

Thomas Christensen on the other hand, in the six paragraphs he dedicates to the discussion of this aspect of musicology in the entry for 'musicology' on the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, while recognizing that "cosmological harmonics continued to hold fascination for a few individuals, although it was an interest largely motivated by esoteric or occult beliefs", mentions also that along with the occult dimension, speculative music has also been interested with the purely mathematical aspects of music (Christensen 2004).

The main difference between speculative music of the latter kind (or *harmonic science*, as Christensen and others refer to it), and physical acoustics or psychoacoustics of a more empirical, modern and scientific approach is nonetheless quite clear: whereas both the physical sciences of music and “musical harmonics [encompass] the abstracted study of musical elements—sounds, intervals, rhythmic proportions, scale systems and modes” the latter is intrinsically holistic rather than reductionist, and strives to seek “the place of these elements in the general cosmological order” (Christensen 2004). In this sense, by stubbornly adhering to a holistic view that seems to have succumbed to modern reductionist scientific thought, it inevitably places itself at odds with the scientific paradigm which reigns since the Enlightenment, since it seems to cling to an almost theological epistemology in which music is an important part of cosmology, and the laws of human music may be traced back to the laws of the universe, and conversely the universe may be discovered or understood through the study of the laws of music (Gouk 2002: 223-245).

Godwin's definition, as presented earlier, comes from a historical musicologist that has painstakingly worked for several decades on the history of the specifically occult stream of speculative music,¹ and therefore, by being a pioneer in the study of this somewhat disdained area of musicology is faced with the need of choosing or adapting terms to describe his field of study.

But his definition, even though perfectly workable, seems to me a little incomplete, wanting, as it were, a bit of expansion: In the sense that speculative music, even if intrinsically not interested in the sounding music of the mundane world, of the ‘uninitiated’ peoples and traditions of the world, has nonetheless given rise to experimental applications of its speculative theories, generally detached from the world of ‘common’ sounding music. This experimentation has eventually given rise to musical pieces intended to be played, sung or in some cases simply read and contemplated by a certain audience² - admittedly small and select, but an audience nonetheless.

Therefore, if the theory of speculative music gives rise to a certain repertoire, and from this repertoire stems a study, a performance, a reception and in the end an admittedly minoritarian yet socially living musical tradition, and from the study of all of these by consequence stems a musicology, it would be fair to say that speculative music is not only ‘the part of music theory that [...] is concerned with identifying the principles of music’ like Godwin tells us, but we could consider speculative music, just as any other type of music, from the three perspectives of the theoretical, the practical—i.e. composition and performance—and the musicological—i.e. the commentary, analysis, study of reception and in general thinking and writing *about* this music.

I would therefore propose an expansion of Godwin's definition, to include as well as the underlying theory, also the repertoire and the commentary on it that arises from the application of musicological perspectives to its study—that is, in addition to theory, also the musical practice and the musicology that speculative music theory generates. In the wider definition I propose, speculative music would not only be 'the esoteric part of music *theory*', but rather the theoretical, practical and musicological aspects the esoteric at these three levels of the study of music. In this paper I undertake the examination of how the esoteric is represented in musical repertoire of this kind, repertoire I propose could be called 'the repertoire of speculative music'.

Approaches to defining 'esoteric' and 'occult'

But what does exactly 'the esoteric' or 'the occult' mean, when applied to music? Godwin dedicates a paragraph in the first chapter of his book *Music and the Occult* to define these terms, among several other useful definitions and term clarification. Here is what he tells us of *esoteric*, by comparison to *exoteric*: exoteric' and 'esoteric' as used in this book, refer to the division within a field between what is generally known and accepted, and what is reserved for only a few. This 'reservation' may be simply a matter of choice, as in the case of Christianity, whose esoteric doctrines interest only a minority of believers, or else it may be a formal division, as in the case of the Mysteries of Antiquity, which were only accessible after due qualification and trials. Because of such usage, 'esoteric' often carries an implication of something mystical or spiritual that touches the deeper levels of the human being. When I use it in the context of music theory, it is to distinguish the exoteric theory that is content with rational analysis from the esoteric theory that introduces concepts from the occult sciences" (Godwin 1995: 3).

But not all of the pieces of the repertoire of speculative music have approached the occult theme to which their composers are drawn to or inspired by in the same way: A quick overview of this proposed repertoire of speculative music seems to suggest that we can identify three distinct levels of depth of understanding, familiarity and ultimately ideological commitment from the composer to the occult ideologies or systems of thought that have been a pre-text for their musical pieces. Yet the level in which a certain piece of music is situated within my proposed model does not depend on the composer's real or reputed understanding, familiarity or ideological commitment with a particular occult ideological framework in general, but rather on how these affect the individual piece of music which is under consideration. In other words, in the model of catalogation I propose the pieces are catalogued by their particular characteristics, independently of the composer's other production, either related to the piece at hand or not, and not by how 'initiated' into occult systems the composer may allegedly or reputedly be.

A simple example will illustrate this point: It is a historical fact that Mozart was initiated a Freemason in the Viennese lodge *Zur Wohltätigkeit* (To Charity) in December 14, 1784, and that he attained the highest degree of symbolic Freemasonry, that of Master Mason, in the same lodge in April 22, 1785 (Chailley 1992). Yet to extrapolate this fact and to consider all of Mozart's production after 1784 as pieces of speculative music just because he was a member of an esoteric society at the time would be preposterous: although there is ample evidence that *Die Zauberflöte* is indeed a deeply Masonic opera,³ as are all the pieces that bear the words *Maurerfreude* or *Maurerische* on their titles, among other of his Masonic works (Hill & Cotte 2004) we can hardly consider the *German dances, ländler, contradances* and other salon or dance music, pieces of a lighter nature and for different audiences and circumstances, as occult or speculative music. In Mozart, as in the case of all composers, initiation into an occult society or group, or serious interest in occult theories or worldviews does not preclude the capacity, interest or need—to secure a livelihood for example—of composing 'mundane' music. The composer's 'initiatory status' does not limit or automatically determine all of his production from that moment on will be 'initiated' or 'occult' music: for different audiences, different music; for different circumstances, different approaches.

The Three Levels of Representation of the Occult in Speculative Music

The three levels of the catalogation I propose are determined by applying a qualitative approach to answering basically one initial question, and then qualifying this answer a bit further, with other questions derived from it, as expressed in the following flow chart:

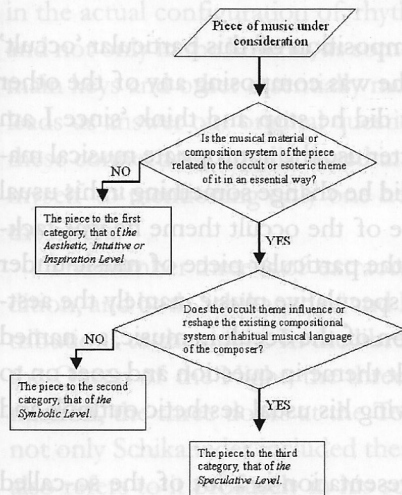


Figure 1: Flowchart for cataloguing music with esoteric themes into the 3 categories proposed here

The root question for the start of the process is therefore: Is the musical material or composition system of the piece related to the occult or esoteric theme of it in an essential way?

I am using the term 'essential' in its philosophical sense, understood as "a thing's possession of its essential properties is necessary either for its individual existence or, at least, for its membership in a specific kind" (Kemerling 2002). Rephrasing the question, could the musical material be what it is, or be treated in the way it is treated, if it wasn't for its relationship to an occult, extra-musical idea, concept or system?

Level 1 – The aesthetic, intuitive or inspired level

If the answer to the root question is clearly no, because the occult connection does not determine the essence or existence of the musical ‘material’—for example if they are related only thematically, or in any other way circumstantially but not structurally—then we can say that the piece belongs to the first, or more superficial level of engagement of the composer with the occult, a level which I call the ‘aesthetic’, ‘intuitive’ or ‘inspired’ level of representation of the occult in music, because the composer is basically inspired by a theme, an atmosphere, perhaps even a title, a character or a concept, and goes on to compose music for it in the same way that he would compose any type of music; but in effect the occult theme does not influence his system of composition, his choice of material, his inclusion of it in the piece or his development of it in any way that we could say is different from the procedures that would be generally used for other types of ‘non-occult’ or ‘non-esoteric’ music.

Examples of this approach abound in the history of music, both in the classical and the popular genres. Opera is full of them, and any opera lover will immediately be reminded of a multitude of specific cases: whenever there is a scene with some sort of sorcery, whether it be in the action or in the form of a character or someone or something which is mentioned, or when portentous magical events are going on, we can say that the composer was thinking in an occult theme, and that therefore there is a link—even if very discrete at this level—between music and the occult.

But did the composer just continue the composition of this particular ‘occult’ section of his opera straight through, just as if he was composing any of the other arias, ensembles or numbers of the opera, or did he stop and think ‘since I am expressing something occult here, I should better use the appropriate musical material or techniques for this’⁴? In other words, did he change something in his usual compositional approaches or practices because of the occult theme he was tackling? If the answer is no, then we can say that the particular piece of music under consideration belongs to the first category of speculative music, namely the aesthetic, intuitive or inspired level of representation of the occult in music, so named because the composer is ‘inspired’ by the occult theme in question and goes on to write music for it in a very intuitive way, following his usual aesthetic outlook and technical practices.

An example of music at this level of representation is a lot of the so-called ‘New Age Music’ (though not all of it, as I will point out later), especially that specifically composed for meditation, and of the type using electronic sounds: since many forms of meditation imply a state of relaxation and stillness, most of this

music is slow, mellow and in general not conducing to any extreme of excitement or excessive mental or physical activity. Many composers of this type of music simply follow these stylistic parameters when composing, and write music that will be appropriate for this type of relaxed and contemplative or meditative activity, but in this general character or 'atmosphere' lies all of what they consider of occult or magical value and power in their pieces: there is nothing essentially—in the philosophical sense—esoteric in their musical material or treatment of it, since tempo or 'atmosphere' can hardly be considered essential to a piece of music.⁵

Level 2 – The Symbolic Level

If, however, we can not answer the root question with a clear no, the piece will not be catalogued as belonging to the first level, but rather to the second or third levels of the proposed model, depending on the answer to a second question which will qualify our original positive answer. The second question is: Does the occult theme influence or reshape the existing compositional system or habitual musical language of the composer?

In other words, if the composer uses a particular compositional system or theoretical base consistently in his music, does he still use the same system for his pieces inspired by occult themes?

I will take the of Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte* as an example of a piece of music belonging to this category. The constant reference to Masonic symbolism in the actual configuration of rhythmic and melodic musical motifs and themes—and not only in the libretto, as some authors have argued⁶—as well as the choice of main keys and other essentially musical (as opposed to extra-musical) parameters leads us answer our original question with an emphatic yes.⁷ Specific examples of these connections are discussed in detail elsewhere (Godwin 1982), so I will limit myself to mentioning only one here: the repeated reference to the number 3 in the opera.

The number three is of extraordinary symbolic significance in the Masonic tradition, and both Schikaneder⁸ and Mozart use it insistently in their respective contributions to the opera. In the libretto we can easily notice the three attendants of the Queen of the Night, the three boys who lead Papageno and Tamino in their mission, the three doors at the Temple, the three initiatory trials, and so on. But not only Schikaneder included these references to the triad in his libretto, Mozart also refers to it profusely in his score, even when the dramatic action would not 'force' him to include the ciphering of the number in his music: In the first minute or so of the whole opera no less, in the overture, three chords are repeated three times. They are in the key of E flat major, a key that we represent in Western mu-

sical notation with three flats at the beginning of the staff. This key is predominant in the whole opera, as it is in most of Mozart's Masonic music, having close association with the famous three dots of Freemasonry, as well as all the many other triads of the tradition. It is clear that Mozart is ciphering the number three in his score, to symbolically connect with this number so significant in the Masonic tradition, which he held in high regard (Thomson 1977).

We can therefore determine that musical material of *Die Zauberflöte* is indeed related to the occult theme of the piece, in an essentially musical way (not only through the text or other extra- or para-musical parameters). It therefore does not belong to the first category of speculative music, the aesthetic, intuitive or inspired level.

But does belong to the second or to the third level of this model? This we can determine by answering the second question: 'Does the occult theme influence or reshape the existing compositional system or habitual musical language of the composer?' In the particular case of *Die Zauberflöte* we have seen that 'the material' is indeed affected by Masonic symbolism, but is the 'compositional system or habitual musical language of the composer' similarly affected by it? Since Mozart consistently uses the tonal system in all of his music, does he change, adapt, modify or in any way challenge it in *Die Zauberflöte*? He does not. We can therefore answer the second question with a 'no', and catalogue the *Die Zauberflöte* in the second level of representation of the occult in music, 'the symbolic level'.

In the realm of popular music, we could consider some instances of so-called 'Satanic' heavy metal music as an example of speculative music at this symbolic level. Many of the bands that write this kind of music justify their 'satanism' on their texts, tempo, intensity and general atmosphere and instrumental and vocal techniques used in their music (such as noisy, raspy filtering or vocal/instrumental technique). But a simple technique of counterpoint such as 'retrograding' a melody or a rhythm might very well connect the music symbolically with one of the main tenets of Satanism, namely the idea that *Demon est Deus inversus* (The Devil is God reversed), as expressed in the inverted pentagram or upside-down Latin cross, also used in satanism as a symbol of its counter-Christianity.

Likewise, if new age meditation music symbolically represents in its 'musical' material any of the occult ideas it adheres to or wishes to support, for example using seven distinct pitch classes to unequivocally represent the seven Chakras of Eastern subtle anatomy, as is often done in music for healing or 'chakra balancing' (Sharamon & Baginsk 1999; Burger 1997; Vicenzo 2000) it would also mean that it is representing the occult at 'the symbolic' rather than 'the intuitional or inspired' level.

In his books 'Music and the Elemental Psyche' and 'The Spiritual Dimension of Music' the composer and author R.J. Stuart discusses the symbolic relationship between the repertoire of several progressive or experimental rock bands of the late seventies and early eighties and their occult and spiritual interests, and how both of these cross-fertilized each other. For a very good justification and examples of how these particular pieces of music fit into what I call 'the symbolic level of representation of the occult in music' I refer to both books by Stewart (Stewart 1987: 1990).

Level 3 – The Speculative Level

Composing music based on, inspired by or in any way related to occult themes seems to offer some composers the opportunity to adapt existing musical languages or theories radically, or build entirely new ones by virtue of the theoretical and epistemological givens and tenets of the occult tradition in question. It seems clear that to do this requires a good understanding and familiarity with the occult system on which one is going to work musically, or at least some willingness to dedicate a significant amount of time studying it.

I call this most developed level of relating occult themes to music 'the speculative level', inasmuch as it is clearly related to Godwin's original definition of speculative music as "the part of music theory that has nothing to do with practice, but is concerned with identifying the principles of music. It is the esoteric part of music theory" (Godwin 1995: 4). At this third level of representation of the occult in music, it is indeed 'music theory' in general that is affected by the occult theme the composer is treating in his music, and not only, as in the previous two levels, extra-musical parameters or particular musical procedures such as instrumentation or choice of key. At this level, the way in which the composer 'thinks' about music, and consequently how he works his particular material, is affected by the occult substratum of the theme he is tackling musically at the level of music 'theory'.

But what do we mean exactly by 'music theory'? 'Theory' is defined by Palisca as "[...] the study of the structure of music", and "at a more fundamental level theory includes considerations of tonal systems, scales, tuning, intervals, consonance, dissonance, durational proportions and the acoustics of pitch systems" (Palisca 2004). Usually musicians take all of this for granted and work within the theoretical frameworks that their time, cultural tradition or school of musical training gives to them, leaving the consideration of theoretical questions to musicologists. Yet some composers are also interested in tackling theoretical problems, especially since the loss of hegemony of the so-called 'common practice' as general and basically unquestioned reference point for so-called 'art music'.⁹ It is of course

these kinds composers which will be naturally inclined to examine, critique, modify or remake their music theory—sometimes as often as for each new work—and a musical piece with an occult connection gives a great opportunity to examine music through the eyes of other types of theories, in this case occult, mystical or para-religious ones.

A very well known example of this kind of composer is Olivier Messiaen. His interest in the exploration of rhythm based on the Indian *talas* is well known, and other occult connections of his music (mainly of the mystical stream) have been thoroughly discussed in the academic literature (Hirsbrunner 1998; Shenton 1998; Darbyshire 1998; Sherlaw-Johnson 1998). The enormous *Turangalila* symphony, actually, refers in its very title and contents to the dance of cosmic unity, a sort of Oriental equivalent of the Western concept of the music of the spheres (James 1993).

Other examples may be cited from the popular repertoire: again referring to New Age music (which undoubtedly has, as a genre, important connections with occult movements and beliefs), those composers of music from this genre which refer to Celtic mythical or magical lore and which take the trouble to use Celtic harmonies, scale-systems or melodies—as transmitted down in oral and recently in written history—are transcending the symbolic level of use of musical material related to the occult, and going into the speculative level of actually modifying their musical system for the sake of a deeper connection between the musical and the extra-musical, in this case occult, substrata of their occult themes.¹⁰

This ends my exposition of the three levels in which I believe speculative music can be catalogued in this proposed model: The aesthetic, inspired or artistic, the symbolic, and the speculative. I hope to, in offering this model, also be balancing the potential explosion of repertoire that can be accepted as 'speculative music' if my suggestion of expanding the definition of 'speculative music' is taken onboard. I am aware I am opening a can of worms with this proposal, but I hope I can be forgiven by also offering a possible model which would enable us to rationalize the myriads of pieces of music that could be accepted as speculative music.

1. Several of his writings review, comment or compile the writings, thoughts and musical endeavours of a wide variety of historical characters ranging from thinkers and philosophers to artist and musicians, including mystics, scientists, occultists and eccentrics of different origins, backgrounds and calibres. See especially his edited volumes *Music, Mysticism and Magic: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions 1993) *Cosmic Music: Musical Keys to the Interpretation of Reality* (Rochester, VM: Inner Traditions, 1989). He further discusses the various app-

roaches to speculative music from a technical rather than a philosophical point of view in *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: the Spiritual Dimensions of Music from Antiquity to the Avant-garde* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions. 1987).

2. An interesting example of this type of propagation of speculative music through reading rather than sounding is the *Atalanta Fugiens* by Michael Maier (Oppenheim. 1618), which could be considered as ‘a Renaissance multimediatic experience’, being, as its subtitle describes, “New chemical emblems of the secrets of nature, adapted partly for the eyes and intellect in figures engraved on copper, with legends, epigrams and notes attached, partly for the ears and the soul’s recreation with about 50 musical fugues in three voices [...] to be looked at, read, meditated, understood, weighted, sung and listened to [...]” Notice that the subtitle seems to imply that the fugues can be read and contemplated as well as audibly sung. Maier, Michael. 1990. *Atalanta Fugiens: Edition of the Fugues, Emblems and Epigrams*. York Beach, Maine: Phanes Press, frontispiece.

3. Chailley’s book, cited above, gives a comprehensive review of several works in this direction. On this respect I refer to his bibliography, in pages 333-336.

4. How we, as musicologists, can determine if the composer indeed did this or not is a methodological issue, that be tackled in various ways, among them biographical information (correspondence, diaries, textual writings by the composer, reported speech and so forth) as well as through musical analysis. Analysis in particular is very useful to determine at which level of this catalogation would a piece of speculative music belong, and to ‘qualify’ how the musical material or composition system of the piece is related to the occult – or if it is related at all in the first place.

5. Proof of this being that a piece can be performed faster or slower within a reasonable range and it will still be recognized as a particular piece of music and not confused with something else.

6. A critique of this position can be read in chapter 2 of Chailley’s *The Magic Flute Unveiled*, already cited.

7. As a reminder, the first question was “Is the musical material or composition system of the piece related to the occult or esoteric theme of it in an essential way?”

8. Emanuel Schikaneder (1751-1812), also a Freemason, was the librettist of this opera.

9. It must be noted that the term ‘Period of Common Practice’ and the concept it denotes is problematic, and has come under strong critique. For a very insightful deflexion on this matter, (see Piekut 2004) “No Common Practice: The New Common Practice and its Historical Antecedents”

<<http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=58tp00>>

10. Of course there is the question of authenticity of the received material, and the problematic issue of its transmission through oral tradition and nationalistic historiographies and discourses. For more on this see Harker, Dave. 1985. *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British Folksong 1700 to the Present Day*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

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